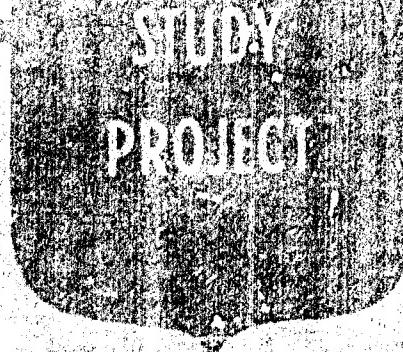


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LEADERSHIP SUCCESSION IN THE MILITARY

BY

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LEADERSHIP SUCCESSION IN THE MILITARY

An Individual Study Project
Intended for Publication

by

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ABSTRACT

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> Leadership succession in an organization as complex as the military is a continuous and difficult challenge. Survival of units on future battlefields depends on how well their members respond to rapid changes in leadership. Sociologists provide an interesting perspective regarding this phenomenon at the organizational and primary group levels. Empirical studies of the military organizations are limited and, therefore, prohibit a comprehensive analysis. Findings from succession studies of comparable sized civilian organizations are used to draw conclusions. Leadership succession at both the division and squad/platoon level impact directly upon unit performance. AirLand Battle doctrine requires cohesive units capable of executing its mission in an environment of constant change. The success of AirLand Battle doctrine can be enhanced with a comprehensive field research effort directed at gaining a full understanding of the impact of leadership changes and the factors associated with limiting any negative impact. Senior Army leaders need to lend their full support to this proposal to ensure success on future battlefields.

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"Wars may be fought with weapons, but they are won by men. It is the spirit of the men who follow and of the man who leads that gains the victory."

- Gen. George S. Patton

INTRODUCTION

Although the topic of leadership has fascinated theorists and practitioners for decades, very little consensus exists with regards to an accepted theory of leadership or even agreement as to the variables involved in the process of leadership. This fact has always concerned me considering the plethora of literature and research in the leadership area. Moreover, the Army's AirLand Battle doctrine as outlined in FM 100-5 OPERATIONS highlights the concept that in the future combat, no challenge exceeds leadership in importance.¹

My interest in the topic of leadership was rekindled during my oral history interview with Major General James R. Taylor, the Commanding General of the 5th Infantry Division (Mechanized) at Ft. Polk, Louisiana. During our discussion, MG Taylor referred to the leadership situation he experienced when he took command of the division as well as the problems his division was experiencing with new junior non-commissioned officer leaders, primarily at the squad and platoon level. In both instances, the focus of our discussion centered around the performance or effectiveness of the division/platoon as a result of the change in leadership at the respective level.

How does a change in leadership impact on unit performance? I found this to be a penetrating question.

The replacement of leaders in an organization as complex as the military is a difficult and continuous challenge. The mere survivability of a tank crew, bomber crew or a naval ship as a functioning combat unit relies on its ability to deal with leadership changes quickly and effectively. The fluid compartmented nature of future battlefields will require sound leadership and well trained, cohesive units. There will be a great demand for units to cope quickly with changes of leadership as well as rapidly changing situations. Future battles will be unforgiving of errors in either of these critical domains.

Sociologists refer to changing leadership personnel in organizations as occupational or administrative succession.² In this paper, leadership succession refers to the processes associated with the movement or loss of individual military leaders from designated positions and their subsequent replacement by new leaders. The purpose of this paper is to explore the topic of leadership succession in the military at the division and higher levels as well as the small unit level and to discuss the implication of leadership changes in terms of AirLand Battle doctrine. At first glance, this may appear to be incongruent; however, I believe the leadership challenges at the "macro" and "micro" organizational levels are equally critical in future wars. FM 100-5 highlights this fact: "The

personal influence of large joint and combined forces, field army, corps and division commanders will have a major bearing on the outcomes of battles and campaigns. Leaders at lower levels will play equally important parts in winning the smaller engagements that make up battles."³

BACKGROUND RESEARCH

A review of the literature in this area leaves much to be desired. Although there is extensive literature on leadership by noted social scientists, such as Fiedler, Stogdill, and Clement, there is very little that focuses specifically on the replacement of leaders, especially military leaders.⁴ Much of what is written is anecdotal or personal opinion and lacks the scholarly rigor normally associated with empirical research. A Defense Technical Information Center (DTIC) literature search listed only two reports vaguely associated with the topics of succession.⁵ My desire to learn more about this topic led me to the Army Research Institute (ARI) and Dr. T.O. Jacobs, a noted leadership and executive development researcher. My discussion with Dr. Jacobs reinforced my impression of the limited nature of research in the area of leadership succession and the problems associated with research in this area. He acknowledged the importance of the area and believed it was worthy of future research.

One might challenge Dr. Jacobs' statement of the value of future research on the grounds that, if it were an important

variable in the leadership equation, then it would have received the attention of social scientist before now. This may or may not be true. Much of existing leadership theory and supporting research is based on a perspective of leadership such as trait theory, contingency theory or systems theory. These theories by themselves are limited and concern themselves only with the variables that are pertinent to the respective theory. Research dealing directly with succession could be lacking simply because it does not align itself with any existing leadership school of thought. Irregardless of these scholarly divisions, the fact remains that changes of leadership in the military impact on unit performance. Excessive change can introduce chaos into an organization. In 1985, nearly half of all generals and admirals, and over half of all four-star officers changed jobs, creating cascading effects that many observers believe undermine cohesion, stability and readiness in subordinate units and staffs.⁶

In addition, I believe there are two other factors responsible for the slow development of substantive research literature focusing on succession in the Armed Forces. First, the political values and bias of civilian social scientists have obscured their view of the military as a truly genuine social system worthy of scientific analysis. Although the military is considered as a prototype bureaucracy, there is a tendency on the part of many academicians to stereotype soldiers, sailors and airmen. The second factor is the fault

of the Defense Department as an institution. The military is a highly conservative organization which has been guilty on many occasions of trying to maximize the ignorance of the public by concealing or limiting public access to information as well as becoming extremely defensive when its integrity is questioned. The behavior of LTC Oliver North during the congressional hearings pertaining to the Iran-Contra Affair is illustrative of all of these perceptions. Unfortunately, both these factors have obstructed social scientific research in the military. As such, many organizational dynamics that exist in the military are left unstudied and, therefore, not totally understood.

In my review of the literature on leadership succession, both military and nonmilitary literature is included. The reason for the inclusion of civilian sector material is twofold: First, as previously stated, military contributions to the study of leadership succession have been sparse and would not support a paper alone; secondly, civilian research and literature can serve as a possible source of hypothesis for future military studies. It should be noted, however, that there isn't consensus on the comparability of literature between the military and private sectors. Some researchers, such as Fottler, Malohe and Penner, argue that one should not generalize from one sector to another; while others, such as Janowitz, O'Connor and Brown, agree that the management processes are similar and negate the differences.⁷ The major distinction between the two types of organizations pivots

around the Armed Forces' operational objective, which is the management of violence. However, both types of organizations contain similar features, such as stratified hierachial structures, unity of command and standard operating procedures. I believe civilian social scientists tend to exaggerate and distort the differences between military and civilian organizations and overlook what is common to large-scale organizations in general.

Early studies on military succession provide interesting insights into the complexities of succession at the major unit level. In 1964, Oscar Grusky conducted a study of succession in the military and a comparable sized nonmilitary business firm. The study addressed the question -- "How do large organizations and their members respond to succession?" Three of Grusky's findings are worthy of note. First, Grusky found that the military, compared to the non-military organizations, show a marked homogenous grouping of personnel at each hierachial level. Secondly, routine leadership succession in the military reinforces the exercise of organizational control. Finally, the military establishment conditions and weakens personal executive authority and encourages the development of a general acceptance of professional and organizational authority.⁸

The results of this pioneer study highlight three important factors with regard to attitude, organizational control, and individual commitment of members within large

units recently experiencing leadership succession. First, the military service members' attitude toward succession became more and more accepting with increased time in the military. This is not revolutionary but supports the "organizational man" thesis in which individual and organizational goals/values become identical. Generally, it is an accepted fact that service members undergo a continuous process of professional socialization. The longer institutional ideologies and values are imposed upon an individual, the more they are apt to become internalized as a part of a person's own value system. Many authors have expressed the notion that loyalty and commitment to the organization are universal characteristics of senior leaders, and these qualities can be linked directly to their personal attitudes.⁹ In short, the majority of senior military personnel are the epitome of the bureaucratic image. They are, for the most part, very impersonal and conservative in the conduct of their duties. They tend to surround themselves with conservative subordinates who have developed an orientation towards organizational authority rather than personal executive authority. Leadership transitions at this level of the military are normally very stable and orderly due to subordinates' perception of authority lying in the position rather than the person assigned to that position. At the higher levels of the military, leadership changes tend to be bureaucratic and rigidly planned rather than flexible and responsive. It is important to note that not all researchers

agree on the degree of stability associated with changes of key leaders in an organization. Many believe that the tremors of change are felt at the lowest levels of the organization.¹⁰

The second finding deals with organizational control. The military community differs from the civilian community in regards to authority and organizational control. The rate of succession in the military inhibits strong identification of members with the top leader. Civilian businesses indicate a strong identification and attachment to the chief executive. Interestingly, the length of tenure in both the civilian and military communities increased the perceived authority of the incumbent leader. The key conclusion to be drawn from this data is that succession in large military organizations, moreso than in civilian organizations, serves to weaken personal executive power and fosters the development of a general orientation towards organizational authority.¹¹

In regards to commitment, Grusky's study indicates that individual commitment to organizational goals in military organizations is very high and is higher than in comparable civilian organizations. This could be the result of the military socialization process, the greater standardization of assignments, and greater strength of professional commitment to unit goals in the military.¹²

An additional aspect of succession in the higher echelons which deserves review is the practice of succession in conjunction w.th other personnel. A common practice of some

incoming commanders or senior staff officers is to bring along an aide, advisor or a complete staff. In military jargon, this sponsorship process has been called such things as: "bringing along my team," "a fair-haired boy," "coat-tailing," or "hitching your wagon to a star." Sociologists refer to this process as succession with an ally.¹³ The political aspects of these strategic replacements are explicit; however, the consequences of this practice can impose serious problems on organizational effectiveness in terms of loyalty.

Robert Guest points out that this technique of the replacement with an ally goes well beyond the necessity for integrating one person into the existing social structure.¹⁴ Integration of multiple individuals or existing groups compounds the succession process. Leadership succession of this type produced a number of well-defined alterations in the social relationship of the staff group. Grusky states that succession with an ally produced significantly more interlevel alliances and fewer intralevel alliances than succession without an ally. Grusky also suggests that succession of an executive with an ally was shown to alter greatly the formal structure of organizational authority.¹⁵ This latter point does not appear to have any sound foundation in the military. The authority structure should remain unchanged; however, a change in the power equilibrium of subordinates may result.

In June 1985, the DCSPER tasked the Army Research Institute (ARI) to study various aspects of "Leader Doctrine

Development" which may have an impact on unit performance. These studies are still continuing however, some initial findings tend to indicate that personnel turbulence within units is a significant obstacle to the development of effective units. The central thesis of these studies is that organizational turbulence, policies and practices, especially at division or higher levels, have a direct impact on subordinate leaders and units.¹⁶ Although the findings are not conclusive, it is intuitive to believe there exists a cause and effect relationship.

At this time, I would like to review the relevant literature pertaining to leadership succession at the lower levels of the military; namely, the squad and platoon level. Although there exists a great deal of fictional and scientific literature on small group and group cohesion, there is very little data or formal research studies on the topic of succession at the primary group level. Perhaps this is the case because most organizational researchers define succession as involving "key" personnel at the higher executive levels. After twenty years of military service, most of which has been spent at battalion or lower level, I contend that there are key personnel at every level of the military hierarchy; and succession at the primary group level is as important to examine as succession at the higher echelons. Retired Army Colonel William Hauser who headed the Officer-NCO manpower team on the 1981-1982 Grace Commission stated: "Transient

leadership at all levels is the biggest single detriment to military effectiveness."¹⁷

S.L.A. Marshall, a noted military writer, stated: "As more and more impact has gone into the hitting power of weapons, necessitating ever-widening deployments in the forces of battle, the quality of the initiative in the individual has become the most praised of military virtues."¹⁸ It is this virtue of initiative and social behavior which is the result of the intimate face-to-face relations of the primary group that makes the study of succession at this level both imperative and exciting.

For the purpose of this paper, the primary group will be defined as a formal collection of individuals whose functional effectiveness is a result of mutual interdependency and characterized by intimate face-to-face association and cooperation.¹⁹ An example of this type of primary group is an infantry squad, a B-52 crew, or a torpedo room crew on a submarine. The size and make-up of these groups are based on technological advancements in weapons and equipment.

The crucial role of face-to-face relationships in combat effectiveness was a universal observation during World War II, the Korean Conflict and the Vietnam War. Two pioneer works on World War II, "Cohesion and Disintegration in the Wehrmacht in World War II" and "The American Soldier," highlight the importance of cohesion of small units as the key factor in combat performance. In both cases, the primary group is shown

as the basic unit of social control which allowed both German and American soldiers to perform under immense stress. Shils and Janowitz state:

"For the ordinary German soldier the decisive fact was that he was a member of a squad or section which maintained its structural integrity and which satisfied some of his basic needs. He was likely to go on fighting, provided he had the necessary weapons, as long as the group possessed leadership with which he could identify..."²⁰

In addition, studies involving air force crews during World War II led to the conclusion that "the men seem to be fighting more for someone than against someone."²¹

During the Korean War, the primary group appeared to be fragmented and face-to-face relations were reduced in scope evolving into what was referred to as "buddy" relationships between two soldiers attempting to survive.²² Personnel rotation policies and spatial dispersion may have been mediating variables inhibiting the full development of primary groups during the Korean War. However, there is significant evidence indicating the importance of leader-subordinate relationships.²³

In the Vietnam War, the nature and focus of primary groups changed. Moskos found that the data from Vietnam pointed to the greater importance of the instrumental and self-serving aspects of primary relations in combat units. He argues that in Vietnam, relationships in primary groups are best understood as pragmatic and situational responses.²⁴

Recently, Twohig and Tremble conducted a study of platoon

performance in tactical exercises at the National Training Center (NTC). They found a correlation between selected leadership variables and unit performance, thus highlighting the importance of leadership of the platoon sergeant and platoon effectiveness at the NTC.²⁵ One of these variables relevant to leadership succession is the length of time the platoon sergeant was in the unit. Generally, the higher performing platoon sergeant had ample time prior to the NTC rotation to establish himself as an effective leader. In addition, small unit cohesion--leader's regard for their squad/team members--and cohesion between squads in a platoon were found to be significantly related to NTC performance. These results reinforce the importance of leadership succession since the development of unit cohesion, stability and performance are dependent upon leaders' actions and policies over time. The impact of leaders on unit performance is recognized by most researchers. There appears to be some limitation from a cause and effect perspective, but there is general agreement that the concept of leadership succession influences leader-subordinate relations.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Leadership succession at all levels of the military is important to ensure success on any future battlefield. The challenges associated with Airland Battle doctrine are crucial. Their complexities make it increasingly important to

concentrate on leader and unit effectiveness. FM 100-5 highlights this fact:

"The skill and courage of leaders at all levels will be critical to success in operations across the spectrum of conflict. As in the past, the chaos of combat will place a premium on the initiative, spirit, cohesion and mental and physical preparedness of soldiers and their units."²⁶

The impact of leadership succession is unquestionably tied to unit cohesion and effectiveness. Jacobs' initial findings suggest the impact of changing leaders at the higher level, and the study by Twohig and Tremble show a similar impact at the squad and platoon level. A characteristic of future battlefields will be the fluid, dynamic nature of war. Change will be constant. To be successful in that type of an environment, military units must simultaneously limit unnecessary change and must train and understand how to operate in a constantly changing environment. In the realm of leadership succession, the military can accomplish this by two means: First, by reducing or limiting leader-subordinate instability and, second, by studying and training on how to effectively transition leaders during combat. Both are complex undertakings and require the full support of the Army leadership.

In terms of stabilizing leader and subordinate relationships, the Army needs to institute a set of policies which limits both inter and intra unit personnel changes. I concur with Dr. Jacobs' proposal to develop a small unit

integrity measure which is submitted as a part of the unit's readiness report.²⁷ Currently, unit readiness reports do not consider small unit integrity or stability, leader-subordinate stability or any factor of unit cohesion. My personal experience with stabilizing tank commander-gunner combinations of tank crews reinforces my belief in the importance of this policy. In my battalion, tank commander-gunner combinations could not be broken up without my approval. Stabilized crews' gunnery scores and maintenance readiness were significantly higher than new crews.

Stabilization policies also need to be established and enforced at the general officer level. General officers are reassigned much too frequently. Policies and practices established at the division level have a major influence on small unit leaders. By reducing the turnover of key leaders, subordinates will become more familiar with command policies and thus more effective.

The second means by which leadership succession can be enhanced pertains to training and preparing for unforecasted leadership changes. A twofold approach is required in order to achieve the desired results. First, a comprehensive field research program must be developed to further our understanding of the complexities involved in leadership changes in a combat or combat simulated environment. A fully resourced, fully manned Army Research Institute (ARI) team should be stationed at NTC to develop and execute a comprehensive longitudinal

study of leadership succession. By setting the study in this environment, the researchers can eliminate irrelevant theories and laboratory bias and achieve a sense of credibility with field commanders. Studies could be designed to test various theories, paradigms and situational factors. The end result hopefully would be a comprehensive understanding of the factors associated with unprogrammed leadership succession.

Once these factors are determined, the second phase or course of action could be implemented. This phase would be a training oriented phase directed specifically at training leaders and units on the factors, techniques and procedures required to enhance unit performance during periods of leadership changes. Again, situations could be designed to prepare units for a myriad situations they might encounter in future battlefields. To the best of my knowledge, training of this nature and intent is not being conducted today.

FUTURE RESEARCH RECOMMENDATIONS

As indicated at the beginning of this paper, the research in the area of leadership succession is minimal. Given the premise that leaders do influence unit performance, then it appears that the succession of leaders in an organization is a critical factor worthy of intensified research. The battlefield of the future is going to be very stressful, and leaders are going to be called upon to perform under spartan conditions. There will be no time for an organizational

effectiveness workshop in order to transition a new leader into his unit.

The following are a few suggestions for future research:

1. First and foremost, the chaotic state of the current literature needs to be reconciled. Each new study seems to cloud, rather than clarify, the discussion of leadership. This is in part due to conflicting concepts and definitions used by the authors. Clear, simple terms and concepts which build on previous research would enhance our knowledge in this area.

2. Future research at both the senior and junior levels of the Army needs to focus on the roles and skills required by the future generals and future squad/platoon sergeants. The battlefields of tomorrow will be quite different from those of today. More prescription and practical utility must come from empirical research. Otherwise, it is just research for research sake, without any benefits gained by the Army.

3. The critical nature of leadership deserves more attention of the Department of the Army in terms of resources. The senior leaders of the Army need to be more directive in terms of providing funds and tasking units to participate in leadership research. We should follow the lead of the Israel Defense Forces who have used behavioral scientists extensively to enhance the performance of their units.²⁸

Research along the lines conducted by Twohig and Tremble at NTC can be designed to replicate closely what leaders will face on future battlefields. Field research should be the

cornerstone of our research efforts fully supported by the senior leaders of the Army.

CONCLUSION

The succession of leaders at both the division and squad level is a significant event in peacetime and can be potentially disastrous during combat. The requirements of Airland Battle make it imperative that we fully understand the process of changing leaders and its subsequent impact on unit performance. The existing literature and research in this area is superficial and requires extensive work before any definitive conclusions can be made. If the Army is serious about preparing for future battles, then it needs to support a concerted field research effort in this area. Only then will Airland Battle doctrine be successful.

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